

The NHSDA Report

July 13, 2001

Pregnancy and Illicit Drug Use

In Brief

- In 1999, almost 4 percent of pregnant women used illicit drugs in the past month, of whom the majority used marijuana.
- The rate of illicit drug use among pregnant women was half the rate among women who were not pregnant.
- Younger pregnant women were more likely to use illicit drugs than older pregnant women.

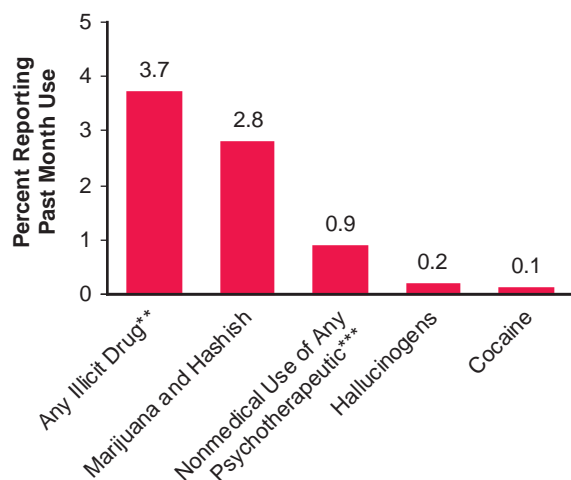
A great deal of medical, governmental, and media attention has been given to the use of illicit drugs by pregnant women because of risks to unborn children.^{1, 2} The 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) includes information on the past month use of illicit drugs among women aged 15 to 44 who reported that they were pregnant at the time of the interview.³

Prevalence of Illicit Drug Use

The 1999 NHSDA estimated that almost 4 percent of pregnant females aged 15 to 44 used illicit drugs (i.e., marijuana, including hashish; cocaine, including crack; heroin; hallucinogens, including PCP and LSD; inhalants; or any prescription-type psychotherapeutic used nonmedically) during the month before the survey.⁴ Of these, 3.4 percent of pregnant females aged 15 to 44 had used a single illicit drug in the past month, and 0.3 percent had used two or more drugs. Past month illicit drug use among pregnant women (4 percent) was half the rate among nonpregnant women (8 percent).

Marijuana was the most widely used illicit drug among pregnant women in 1999, with an estimated 2.8 percent reporting past month use (Figure 1). An estimated 0.9 percent of pregnant women reported the nonmedical use of one or more prescription psychotherapeutic drugs in the past month.

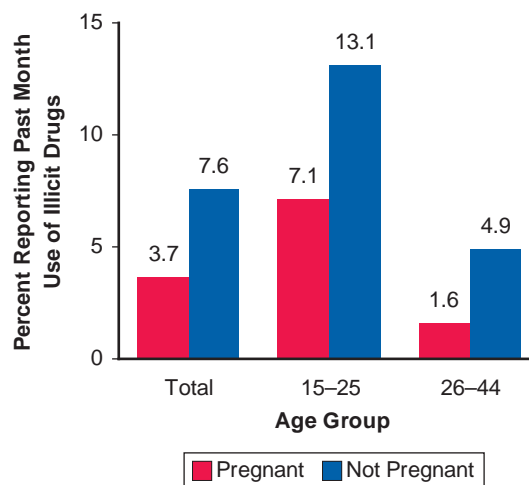
Figure 1. Percentages Reporting Past Month Use of Illicit Drugs Among Pregnant Females Aged 15 to 44: 1999*



*Data presented may differ from previously published data from the 1999 NHSDA because of corrections made to imputation procedures. Source: SAMHSA 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA).

**Any Illicit Drug indicates use at least once of marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens (including PCP and LSD), heroin, or any prescription-type psychotherapeutic used nonmedically.

Figure 2. Percentages Reporting Past Month Use of Illicit Drugs Among Females Aged 15 to 44, by Pregnancy Status and Age Group: 1999*



***Nonmedical use of any prescription-type pain reliever, tranquilizer, stimulant or sedative; does not include over-the-counter drugs.

An estimated 0.2 percent of pregnant women had used hallucinogens in the past month, and 0.1 percent had used cocaine.

Age Differences

The rate of past month illicit drug use among pregnant women was higher for females aged 15 to 25 (7 percent) compared to women aged 26 to 44 (2 percent). These percentages translate to approximately 66,000 pregnant females aged 15 to 25 who were past month illicit drug users compared to 25,000 pregnant women aged 26 to 44. Among females aged 15 to 25, the rate of illicit drug use among those who were pregnant was half of the rate for those who were not pregnant. Among women aged 26 to 44, the rate of illicit drug use among pregnant women was one third of the rate for nonpregnant women.

Racial/Ethnic Differences

In 1997 and 1998, white and Hispanic women who were pregnant had lower rates of past month illicit drug use than their peers (Figure 3).⁴ However, the rate of past month illicit drug use among pregnant black women (7 percent) was not significantly different from the rate among black women who were not pregnant (8 percent). Pregnant black women were 4.5 times more likely to have used illicit drugs in the past month than white pregnant women.

Illicit Drug Use Among New Mothers

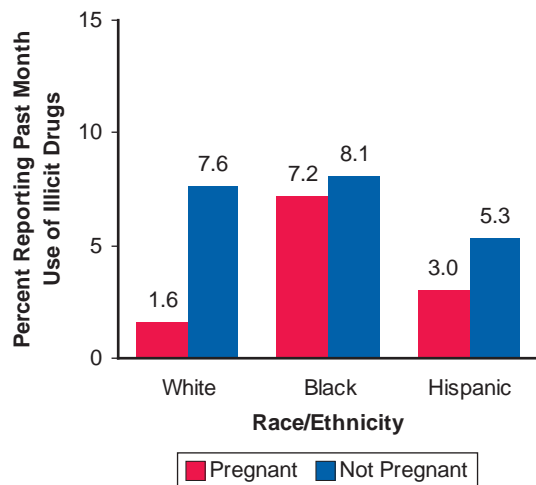
The lower rate of illicit drug use reported during pregnancy continued during the first year after women gave birth (Figure 4). Approximately 5 percent of new mothers (females aged 15 to 44 who

had a child younger than 1 year old) reported using an illicit drug in the past month, which was significantly less than the rate for all nonpregnant women. The rate of any illicit drug use was similar between new mothers and currently pregnant women. This same pattern held for past month use of marijuana; the rate among currently pregnant women (3 percent) and new mothers (3 percent) was similar and was half the rate for all nonpregnant females aged 15 to 44 (6 percent). However, for illicit drugs other than marijuana, the rate of past month use was higher for new mothers (3 percent) compared to currently pregnant women (1 percent). The rate for new mothers was also lower than the rate for all nonpregnant women.

Summary

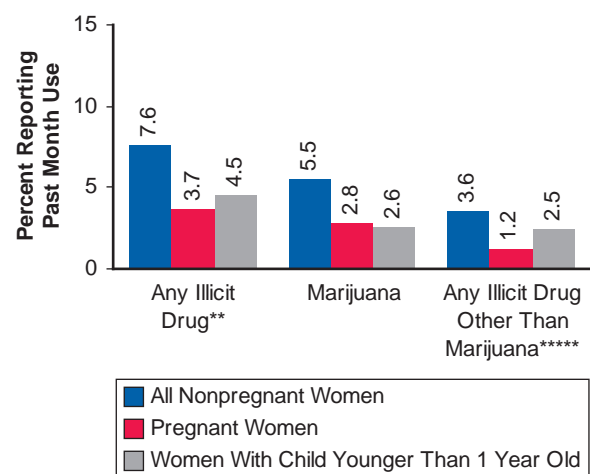
According to the 1999 NHSDA, the rate of illicit drug use among pregnant females aged 15 to 44 was

Figure 3. Percentages Reporting Past Month Illicit Drug Use Among Females Aged 15 to 44, by Pregnancy Status and Race/Ethnicity: 1997 and 1998****



****Data were combined over 2 years because in a single year there were too few pregnant women reporting illicit drug use to permit an analysis. Source: SAMHSA 1998 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA).

Figure 4. Percentages Reporting Past Month Illicit Drug Use Among Females Aged 15 to 44, by Pregnancy and Recent Motherhood Status: 1999*



*****Any Illicit Drug Other Than Marijuana indicates use at least once of cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens (including PCP and LSD), heroin, or any prescription-type psychotherapeutic used nonmedically; marijuana/hashish users who also have used any of the other drugs listed are included.

half the rate for nonpregnant women, but an estimated 91,000 pregnant women had used illicit drugs in the month before the survey. Marijuana was the drug most frequently used, followed by the nonmedical use of prescription psychotherapeutic drugs. Younger pregnant women were more likely to use illicit drugs than older pregnant women. In 1997 and 1998, illicit drug use was higher among black pregnant women than white pregnant women; the rate for pregnant black women was similar to the rate for nonpregnant black women. The rate of marijuana use among women who had a child younger than 1 year old was lower than the rate for all nonpregnant females aged 15 to 44, indicating that the lower rate of marijuana use reported during pregnancy continues in the year after giving birth. The rate for illicit drugs other than marijuana was higher among women who had recently given birth than for currently pregnant women.

End Notes

- ¹ Smeriglio, V.L. & Wilcox, H.C. (1999). Prenatal drug exposure and child outcome: Past, present, future. *Clinical Perinatology*, 26(1), 1-16.
- ² Cornelius, M.D., Day, N.L., Richardson, G.A., & Taylor, P.M. (1999). Epidemiology of substance abuse during pregnancy. In P.J. Ott & R.E. Tarter (Eds.), *Sourcebook on substance abuse: Etiology, epidemiology, assessment, and treatment* (pp. 1-13). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, Inc.
- ³ Except for women who had been pregnant for less than 1 month, this information on past month use indicates use during pregnancy.

⁴ Note that these estimates of illicit drug use during pregnancy are conservative because they reflect use only in the past month, not during the entire pregnancy. The estimated numbers of illicit drug users reflect the numbers of users among women who were pregnant at the time of the survey, not among all women who were pregnant in 1999.

⁵ The numbers of pregnant women of different demographic groups who reported using illicit drugs in any 1 year were insufficient for an analysis. To ensure adequate precision of estimates for pregnant women, the presented data represent annual average estimates for 1997 and 1998 combined.

The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The 1999 data are based on information obtained from nearly 70,000 persons aged 12 or older, including 832 pregnant females aged 15 to 25 and 305 pregnant women aged 26 to 44. The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

The NHSDA Report is prepared by the Office of Applied Studies (OAS), SAMHSA, and by Research Triangle Institute (RTI), Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. Information and data for this issue are based on the following publication and statistics:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2000) *Summary of findings from the 1999 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 00-3466, NHSDA Series H-12). Rockville, MD: Author.

Also available on-line: <http://www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov>.

Additional tables available upon request; adapted from 1.110A; 1.110B from http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/99detailedtables/Vol_1_Part_1/Sect1v1.htm.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2000) *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Main findings 1998* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 00-3381, NHSDA Series H-11). Rockville, MD: Author.

Additional tables available upon request.